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ABSTRACT

The contention that Esperanto is a natural linguistic system is discussed. Research is cited concerning universals of word order, dominant word order, polar type languages, Esperanto as a verb-subject-object language, and gapping in Esperanto. It is concluded that contrary to grammatical tradition, word order is not and cannot be completely free. This finding is especially important in the case of Esperanto where a logical system has been developed, but where the natural constraints of human languages have sometimes been overlooked. The research that is considered has implications for a theory of interlanguage and stimulates questions about the nature of topicalization and focus on Esperanto word order. (SW)

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UNIVERSALS OF WORD ORDER IN ESPERANTO

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INTRODUCTION

When a language is created de novo, the possibility exists that even though the system may be logically designed, the final product could be viewed as unnatural in comparison to genetically developed human languages. This is especially true in the case of mathematical and computer languages where the code is mechanized to fit the idiosyncracies of the machine, but fail utterly as a model of human communication. Now that we are cognizant of this dichotomy between natural and artificial languages, it remains for us to ask if Esperanto is a natural language. Does the system which Zamenhoff constructed reflect those properties which are characteristically associated with natural languages? In this paper, I argue that Esperanto is a natural linguistic system, and that this fact is sometimes overlooked by advocates of grammatical reform. In the area of word order, in particular, they have failed to seriously consider the implications of current theoretical research as the scientific rationale for the linguistic modification of the language.

UNIVERSALS OF WORD ORDER

Over a decade ago, Greenberg (1963) investigated the order of sentential elements in some thirty dissimilar languages. The results of this study are important because they represent a genuine breakthrough in the area of linguistic universals. Prior to this momentous discovery, linguists generally considered word order to be of little or no theoretical interest. It was not a consequence of grammatical constraints, but found its motivation in the search for euphony, an avoidance of monotony, or some other kind of rhetorical devices. In Esperanto, similar explanations of word order can be found, but for some (Mann, 1908) it is not even considered worthy of explication.

> "The normal order of the words in Esperanto is similar to that in English: Subject-Verb-Object. But in order to throw special emphasis on the Object or some other part of the sentence, the word-order is often changed..."
>
> (Cresswell & Hartley, 197C:86)

> "It is perfectly good Esperanto to change words around and say, la cigaron mi deziras, or even la cigaron deziras mi."
>
> (Connor, et al., 1966:49)

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"Although the commonest word order is, as in English, subject-predicate-object, any order of these elements is in fact possible: for varied emphasis or for stylistic effect..."

(Wells, 1969:22)

DOMINANT WORD ORDER

What Greenberg has demonstrated from his cross-linguistic study is that not all word orders from the repetoire of logical possibilities can be found to exist in human languages. Even though the elements S (subject), V (verb), and O (object) can be permuted to yield six possible stylistic orders, only three of these are found to be statistically dominant.

Logically Possible Order

verb initial	VSO, VOS
verb medial	SVO, OVS
verb final	SOV, OSV

Dominant Orders

verb initial	VSO
verb medial	SVO
verb final	SOV

The elements in the dominant word order, Greenberg noted, are subject to further constraints. In each sentence type, the subject of the sentence always occurs before the object, viz., VSO, SVO, and SOV. Another consequence of this in-depth analysis is the realization that verb initial and verb final languages are polar types, i.e. their sentential elements have a mirror image distribution.

Position of the Verb

VSO - initial
SOV - final

Position of the Relator

VSO - preposition + noun
SOV - noun + postposition

Position of Question Marker

VSO - sentence initial
SOV - sentence final

Position of the Auxiliary

VSO - before the main verb
SOV - after the main verb

Position of the Article

VSO - before the noun
SOV - after the noun

Position of the Relative Clause

VSO - after the modified noun
SOV - before the modified noun

Position of the Genitive

VSO - after the noun
SOV - before the noun

Position of the Adjective

VSO - after the noun
SOV - before the noun

Position of Negation

VSO - before the verb
SOV - after the verb

POLAR TYPE LANGUAGES

These facts about the universals of word order have undergone further analysis since the Dobbs-Ferry Conference (Greenberg, 1963). At Stanford University, the language universals project has continued to publish its findings in its Working Papers on Language Universals, and at the University of California this study has continued from a diachronic perspective (Li, 1975).

An interesting fact about verb medial word order is that this construction type overlaps with verb initial word order. This phenomenon was noted by Greenberg (1963), but no explanation was offered. If VSO and SOV languages are polar types, it was asked, then how are SVO languages to be classified? How do verb medial languages relate to polar types? The answer to this question came when McCawley (1970) investigated English word order. He provided linguistic evidence which clearly demonstrated at that time that at an abstract syntactic level, there are only two kinds of underlying word orders, viz., the polar types: VSO and SOV deep structures. This conclusion is important not only because it corroborated Greenberg's findings, but also because it provided an explanation for them, i.e. VSO and SVO structures are

surface variants. Ross (1970) has since substantiated this claim by his study of the constraints of deletion in conjoined sentences.

EXPERANTO AS A VSO LANGUAGE

The word order in Esperanto is basically verb medial (Cresswell, et al., 1970), and this can be readily ascertained from the following data:

Mi skribis leteron.
"I wrote a letter."

La viro iras en la domon.
"The man goes into the house."

However, if McCawley's observations about VSO and SVO languages are correct (McCawley, 1970), and we believe that they are, then Esperanto should be a verb initial language. This fact becomes apparent when the syntactic and morphological structures of Esperanto are compared with those of verb initial languages.

Position of the Verb - Initial, Medial[1]

Legas la viro libron
La viro legas libron
"The man reads a book"

Position of the Question Marker - Sentence Initial

Ĉu vi sidas? "Are you sitting?"
Ĉu la viro amas la virinon? "Does the boy love the girl?"
Kie estas la lokomotivoj? "Where are the trains?"
Kiel ili veturas? "How do they travel?"
En kiu ĉambro li dormas? "In which room does he sleep?"

Position of the Relator - Preposition + Noun [2]

sur la tablo	"on the table"
sub la seĝo	"under the chair"
apud la hundo	"near the dog"
antaŭ la domo	"in front of the house"

Position of the Auxiliary - Before the Verb

Vi estas falinta. "You have fallen."
Ili devas legi. "They must read."
Mi estis edukata de mia patro. "I was educated by my father."
La domo estas detruita de ili. "The house was destroyed by them."

Position of the Articles - Before the Noun

la patro	"the father"
la patrino	"the mother"

Position of the Relative Clause - After the Modified Noun[3]

la bildo, kiu pendas sur la muro
"the picture which hangs on the wall"

la parko, kie la infanoj ludas
"the park where the children play"

la persono, kies bezono estas granda
"the person whose need is great"

Position of the Genitive - After the Noun[4]

la libro de Maria "Mary's book"
la via libro "your book"

Position of the Adjective - After the Noun[5]

la lingvo internacia "the international language"

Position of Negation - Before the Verb

Mi ne laboras "I don't work"
Ne venu! "Don't come!"

Since verb initial and verb final languages are polar types, their word orders are in complementary distribution. What this means for Esperanto is that certain stylistic variants should be considered to be wholly outside the system of possibilities. Note that in the following structural examples, the asterisk (*) signifies non-grammaticality.

Verb Initial, Never Verb Final

*la viro libron legas "The man reads a book"

Pre-positional, Never Post-positional

*la tablo sur "on the table"
*tablo sur la

Auxiliary Verbs before Main Verbs, Never After

*falinta estas "have fallen"

Articles before Nouns, Never after

*tablo la "the table"

Relative Clauses before Nouns, Never after

*la kiu pendas sur la muro bildo
*kiu pendas sur la muro la bildo
"the picture which hangs on the wall"

Genitives before Nouns, Never after

*la de Maria libro "Mary's book"

Adjectives before Nouns when Literal Meaning Intended, Never after

la viro granda	"the big (in size) man"
*la granda viro	"the big (in size) man"
la granda viro	"the important man"

Other constraints on stylistic variants which are associated with polar language types are best explained in relationship to the phenomenon of "gapping".

GAPPING IN ESPERANTO

Ross (1970) noted that there are certain constraints on what repeated elements can be deleted in conjoined sentences. Consider, as a case in point, the following sentences from English:

John ate fish, Bill ate rice, and Tony ate steak.
John ate fish, Bill rice, and Tony steak.
*John fish, Bill rice, and Tony ate steak.

These sentences provide a pattern in which the repeated verbal elemented is deleted in some of the conjoined sentences leaving a gap. In the VSO sentences, the gap occurs to the right of the main verb, but in Japanese, a SOV language, the gap occurs to the left of the main verb.

Watakushi wa sakana o tabe, Biru wa gohan o tabeta.[7]
(I SM fish OM eat Bill SM rice OM eat)

"I ate fish, Bill ate rice."

*Watakushi wa sakana o tabeta, Biru wa gohan o.

From this, Ross concluded that SVO languages gap forward, and SOV languages gap backward.

Forward Gapping

SVO + SVO ⟶ SVO + SO

Backward Gapping

SOV + SOV ⟶ SO + SOV

Since SVO languages are surface manifestations of an underlying VSO construction, we can now modify Ross' statement as follows:

Forward Gapping

VSO + VSO ⟶ VSO + SO
SVO + SVO ⟶ SVO + SO

What this means for Esperanto is that forward gapping is an acceptable stylistic device, but backward gapping is not.

Forward Gapping

Maria vidis libron, kaj Johano vidis krajonon.
Maria vidis libron, kay Johano krajonon.
"Mary saw a book, and John saw a pencil."

Backward Gapping

*Maria libron vidis, kaj Johano krajonon vidis.
*Maria libron, kaj Johano krajonon vidis.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to grammatical tradition, word order is not and cannot be completely free. This finding is especially important in the case of Esperanto where a logical system has been developed, but where the natural constraints of human languages have sometimes been overlooked. The research presented here is have vast implications for a theory of interlanguage, and invites stimulating questions about the nature of topicalization and focus on Esperanto word order.

Notes

1. This classification is based on abstract underlying structures. Hence, VSO and SVO are surface structures of the same polar type.

2. Wells (1969:12) notes that prepositions often end clauses in English, but never in Esperanto. This difference merely rests on how the rule of WH-Fronting is formulated, and may even be excessive when compared to the rules employed in natural languages.

   English

   You are talking about what? --- What are you talking about?

   Esperanto

   Vi parolas pri kio? → Pri kio vi parolas?
   "What are you talking about?"

   Vi donis ĝin al kiu? → Al kiu vi ĝin donis?
   "Whom did you give it to?

3. The use of commas in Esperanto are consistent, but they are not as informative and natural in comparison to other languages. Commas are linguistic devices for representing fragmented or transformed structures, cf., "John saw Mary yesterday" vs "Yesterday, John saw Mary. In the latter sentence, the transformed element is isolated and marked off by a comma to signify a fragmented linguistic structure. The crucial weakness in the use of commas in Esperanto can be found in its inability to distinguish restrictive from non-restrictive clauses, i.e. "The Greeks who are philosophical live in Athens" vs "The Greeks, who are philosophical, live in Athens." The latter is derived from conjoined sentences and result in the surface structure form through a series of rules:

   The Greeks live in Athens, and the Greeks are philosophical
   The Greeks live in Athens, and they are philosophical
   The Greeks, and they are philosophical, live in Athens
   The Greeks, who are philosophical, live in Athens.

4. This constraint does not hold for possessive pronouns, cf. la mia libro. Only when a full nominal form modifies another does the rule take effect. The English equivalent, however, presents a problem as the following expressions demonstrate: the book of Mary, Mary' book.

5. In Spanish, a VSO language with many structural similarities to Esperanto, the adjectival forms may occur either before or after the noun modified. However, these positional variants are not equivalent. When the literal meaning is expressed, the adjective follows the noun; and when a metaphorical use is intended, the order is reversed. If an analogy can be made for Esperanto, the difference between "la lingvo internacia" and "la internacia lingvo" should be substantial.

6. English has a special verbal element which is added to isolated tense

forms, viz. do.

7. Japanese has a subject marker (SM), and an object marker (OM).

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